

One Year of L.B.J.

by Tom Wicker

drawings by Robert Osborn

Not since George Washington ran unopposed had any President emerged from an election under such splendid auguries as those that greeted Lyndon B. Johnson twelve months ago. The Republican Party lay in shards and splinters somewhere in the rubble of the greatest landslide in history. Congress belonged to Johnson's Democrats, lock, stock and pork barrel. After a year of secondhand status as John Kennedy's successor, the President had an established Administration reasonably united under his leadership, his operating methods had been tried in the furnace, and the broad outlines of his program had been carved from his Populist background, the Kennedy legacy, and his own 30 years of unrivalled experience in getting things done. Barry Goldwater and his curious crew had succeeded in gaining for that program, as well as for the President himself, the most resounding public mandate since FDR promised Repeal.

It was just as well, therefore, that the doctors who recently removed Johnson's gallbladder and one kidney stone (leaving another for future reference) did not locate those extra glands Jack Valenti had claimed as Presidential equipment. This failure was downright reassuring after a year in which it had become all too easy to believe that LBJ was not constructed quite

like you and me. He was not, after all, the probing surgeons were able to show us, a super-Lyndon. If, like Valenti, we could sleep more soundly because Johnson was our man in the White House, it was not for glandular reasons.

Rather, the most casual glance across the months to November of 1964, the beginning days of what might be called the Second Johnson Empire, discloses that Johnson is not an anatomical freak but a superb political leader who has known how to take advantage of favorable circumstances and to get through the rainy days without wetting his feet.

The Second Empire, it seems to me, began in December when the President moved the multilateral nuclear force to the bottom of his agenda. This was done by the simple expedient of leaking to the press a National Security Council memorandum in which the President ordered eager diplomats to cease and desist in any "pressure tactics" on the allies, in order that there might be the fullest consultations, the maximum unity among European nations, and ultimate approval of all plans by both Britain and Germany (each of whom, at that time, was expected to undergo elections in 1965).

No doubt this was significant diplomatically; it certainly was symbolic for the Second Empire. It meant that Johnson wanted to concentrate on domestic affairs, where his expertise was unchallenged and his weapons were formidable, and that he was determined to do so until he had a chance to visit abroad, assert his diplomatic leadership, and find out which way the Euro-

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pean cats ultimately would jump. It was the Johnson Method – concentrating on his strengths and preparing his ground.

The MLF episode may also have suggested to those who ponder the alliance's defense problems that the President was merely delaying inevitable decisions; he

was making his own beginning, not concluding or solving the matter. A year later, that too seems symbolic – not merely of Lyndon Johnson but of the political process itself. Seldom has it been better illustrated than in the first year of the Second Empire that politics solves few problems; it can raise them and it can ease them, but solutions, if any, are up to other processes. Political actions, in fact, are likely to create even more things to be done.

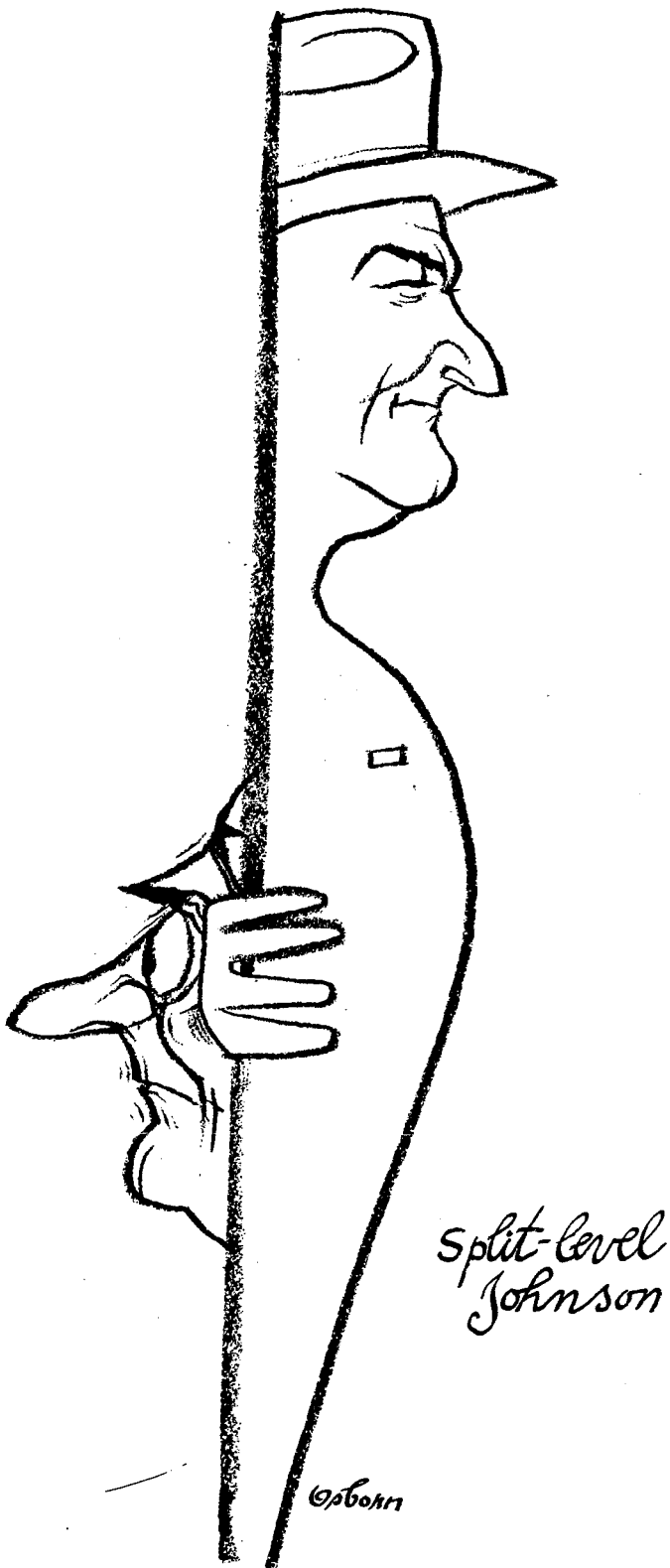
Having papered over his foreign exposure, the President proceeded immediately to lay out the Great Society. In his State of the Union message – delivered, for maximum effect and needle-power, the day the 89th Congress convened – he pressed for a new education bill, the old Medicare program, broad approaches to conservation and natural beauty, a doubled war on poverty, an arts and humanities fund, reduced excise taxes and virtually every leftover from Democratic Presidents going back to the New Deal; he even gave a glimmer of green light to government activity in population control. For good effect, he talked of visiting Europe and Latin America and proposed an exchange of visits with the new Soviet leaders.

Flurry over the Funeral

But it was a foreign trip Johnson did not propose that shortly was in the headlines. When Sir Winston Churchill died, the President was just out of hospital, where he had gone for treatment of a chest cold. Since he could not travel himself, it was widely assumed that he would send Vice President Hubert Humphrey to represent the United States at the Churchill funeral.

For reasons of his own, which the general public seemed to consider malevolent, Johnson left Humphrey sitting on the home bench. This real or imagined slight caused the first widespread criticism of the Second Empire and began a sort of continuing bemusement in Washington about the status of the Vice President. One day he appeared a useful Administration official; the next he seemed to be a lackey bound hand and foot to the President. Either way, he was obviously the busiest Vice President in history, not excluding Lyndon B. Johnson.

Events on the Hill soon overshadowed the minor crisis over the Humphrey-Churchill plight. Johnson had judged the moment correctly, he had the majorities, the public support, the riddled opposition, the political expertise. It was the time to strike and he struck hard. Providing astute leadership, palatable measures, and a carefully nurtured climate of public approval, Johnson wrested from his majorities the most remarkable legislative record at least of the postwar era (characteristically Texan, Johnson himself claimed it was the best ever). In doing so, he achieved not so much absolute dominance over a rubber-stamp Con-



gress (it frustrated him on home rule for the District of Columbia, the repeal of Section 14(b) of the Taft-Hartley Act, federal pay raises, and improved on his handiwork in such programs as Medicare) as a taut and effective relationship between President and Congress – the one initiating and leading, the other examining, braking, improving – that resulted in general concurrence, not legislative dictatorship.

At least twice, Johnson's skillful political opportunism came to his rescue. When the Rev. Martin Luther King and the Selma marchers generated a new

racial crisis in March, Johnson wasted little time – except privately – in complaining about Negro ingratitude for the Civil Rights Act of 1964; he seized the opportunity King provided and thrust before Congress a bill to remedy the major weakness of the 1964 measure. It provided federal registrars to put Negroes on the voting books in the Southern areas most marked by discrimination, and it may prove to be the bluntest instrument yet wielded against racial injustice.

Again, Johnson waited until precisely the right moment before seizing on a suggestion by Rep. Gerald

*"A taut and effective
relationship between
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Ford, the House Republican leader — of all people — that he request a special appropriation for the Vietnamese war; then Johnson made the vote on the request something like a vote of confidence in the President — one he knew he could not help but win. Members of Congress do not customarily vote against American troops under fire and, though many were disgruntled, they produced an overwhelming and welcome display of support for Johnson's Vietnamese policy.

That policy nonetheless continued to be the President's major problem and an issue on which his "consensus" appeared somewhat thin. In February, he ordered the bombing of North Vietnam, supposedly in retaliation for Communist Viet Cong "provocation"; as the year wore on it became apparent that the bomb-

ing was more nearly a bargaining counter to be used in getting the issue to the negotiating table.

"Negotiations" was for a short time a dirty word at the White House; then, after a Johnson speech at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, the quest for negotiations became a prominent part of the Vietnamese policy. That policy, stated simply, was by force of arms to convince the Viet Cong that they could not win a military victory, and thus to drive them and their North Vietnamese sponsors to the table for a negotiated peace.

Many people outside the Administration, and some within it, disliked this approach. Some liberal members of Congress railed against the bombing; some Republican members wanted more bombing and no non-



sense about negotiations; some generals concurred; and the Vietnamese war began to rival civil rights as a cause for youthful and academic discontent, picketing, beard-growing and guitar-strumming.

On this issue, even as he began to move his sweeping legislation through a rejuvenated Congress, Johnson suddenly became a minor national villain. Here was the possibility of history repeating itself in a way Johnson privately had vowed he never would permit; just as FDR, master of all he surveyed after the 1936 landslide, had gone aground trying to pack the Supreme Court, would LBJ founder in the storm rising over Vietnam?

And then the Dominican Affair

As the question became acute, moreover, Johnson plunged headlong into another foreign adventure, the intervention in the Dominican Republic, that was entirely of his own making and seemed to many critics even less justifiable than the enlarged Vietnamese war. A smattering of troops who had gone in to save American lives in Santo Domingo suddenly became a force of 20,000 valiantly trying to save the Dominican Republic from Communists, Castroites and other vaguely defined forces of 20th-Century evil.

Nobody ever really proved the presence of the Communists — which is not to say that they weren't there, or about to be — and at times it looked (on television screens and in the most reputable newspapers and magazines) as if the American troops were really saving the Dominicans from anybody and everybody except the military junta that the Administration had helped to set up (as a bargaining counter to the rebels, it was explained, with a view to getting a negotiated settlement; the Vietnam approach in different circumstances). A ranting Johnson, appearing suddenly on Sunday night television, made matters worse by seeming to promise more such interventions anywhere the specter of Communism might emerge in the Western hemisphere; that opened too broad a range of possibilities for comfort.

Thus, at midyear, as he juggled both Vietnam and the Dominican Republic, Johnson reached the low point of the Second Empire. The Washington press turned sour, raking both episodes as well as the volatile Johnson personality over the coals, and the President struck back in kind — lowrating the press at every opportunity, singling out some offenders for such indignities as deliberate mispronunciations of their names, yet hauling reporters in for endless almost compulsive harangues about the problems he faced, the iniquities of his opponents, and the sterling virtues of his policies.

There was widespread gloom in Washington, at that time, particularly among some who knew and admired Johnson most; many feared he had stumbled off bal-

ance and would not regain his footing, that in the trials of foreign policy he would lose his glittering opportunity at home.

It did not happen. By now, we can see that Johnson ended the year since his election not much less in command than when he began it; that he made good on his domestic promises, survived about as well as anyone could in Vietnam, kept some kind of lid on the Dominican Republic, and maintained the general confidence and prosperity.

There are several reasons, I think, why Johnson recovered so remarkably from his early summer dol-



drums. The first, but perhaps not the most important, is that things actually began to go fairly well – better, at least, than predicted even in the White House – in Vietnam and the Dominican Republic.

They went better both at home and on the scene. In particular, the President regained much ground with one stroke – the August news conference in which, although he announced increased draft calls and more troops to South Vietnam, he did not take so military an approach as his own advisers had urged; he carefully and conspicuously kept open a diplomatic alley to negotiations. From Walter Lippmann to the man in the street, one could almost feel the sense of relief in the country.

On the scene, American troops stabilized the military situation to the point where military sources, at least, now assert that the shooting war cannot be lost; and here was a respite from the endless cycle of coups, regimes and more coups that had made the phrase "Saigon government" little more than a joke.

As for the Dominican Republic, neither the obstreperous generals nor the elusive Communists wound up in charge, and some sort of a government under the

auspices of the Organization of American States is functioning somehow. The whole contraption might blow up any day but out of sight is out of mind; with the cessation of daily headlines from Santo Domingo, the whole issue seems to have dropped from the public's ken, if not from the President's.

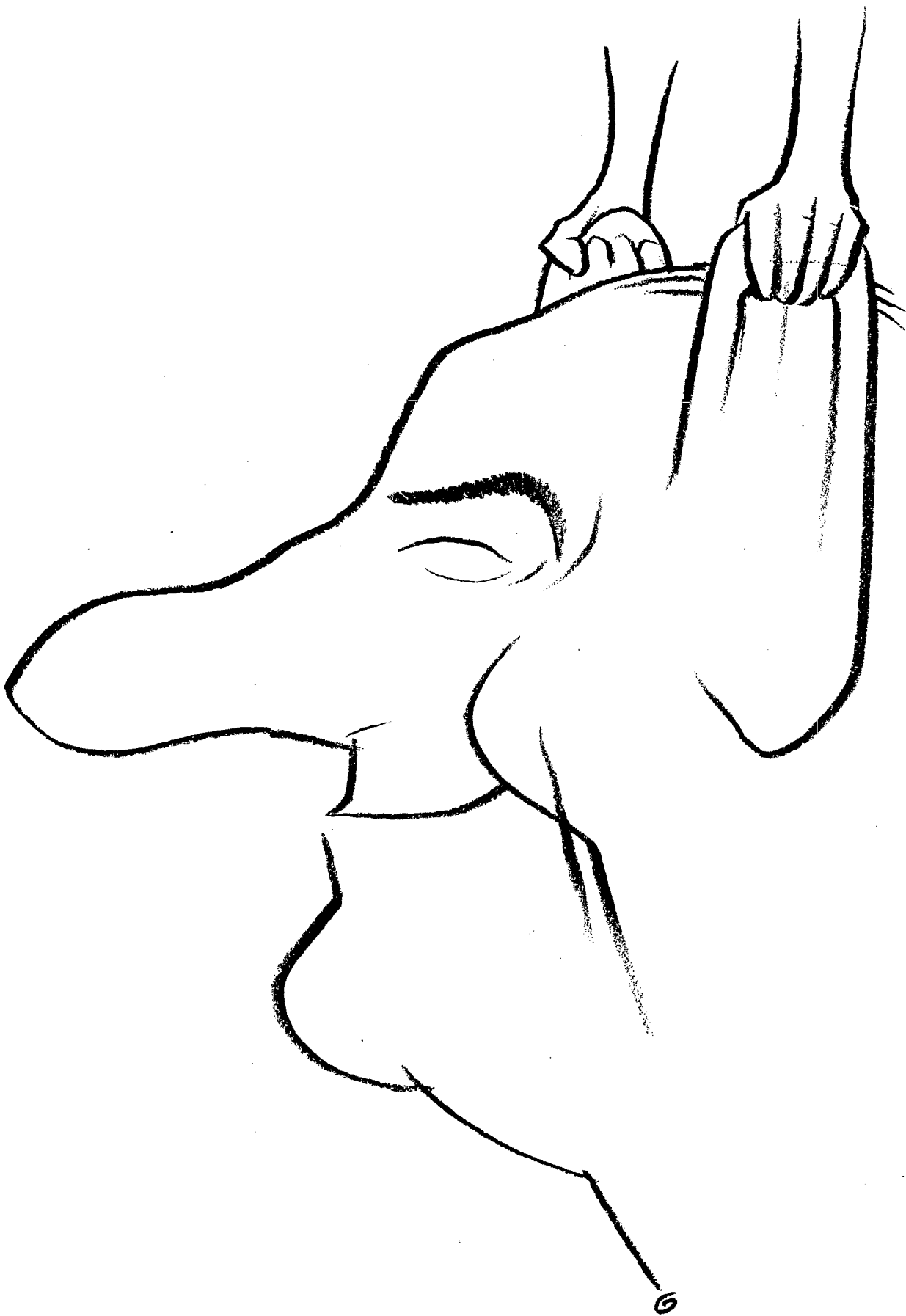
Moreover, as if having learned a hard lesson, Johnson's restraint during the brief Indian-Pakistani war was exemplary. He took no sides, rattled no sabres, remained discreetly silent except for obvious peace appeals, worked with the Soviets under cover of the United Nations, and not only got a tenuous ceasefire but restored a degree of dignity and prestige to the UN, which needed it.

Another reason for the flourish with which Johnson finished his year – and a somewhat more disturbing one – was his ability to dominate and color the public atmosphere. This was based in no small part on his massive use of television and tireless pursuit of publicity; it was given a considerable boost in midsummer by one of the President's most inspired appointments – that of the redoubtable Bill Moyers to be his press secretary as well as his top staff assistant. Moyers



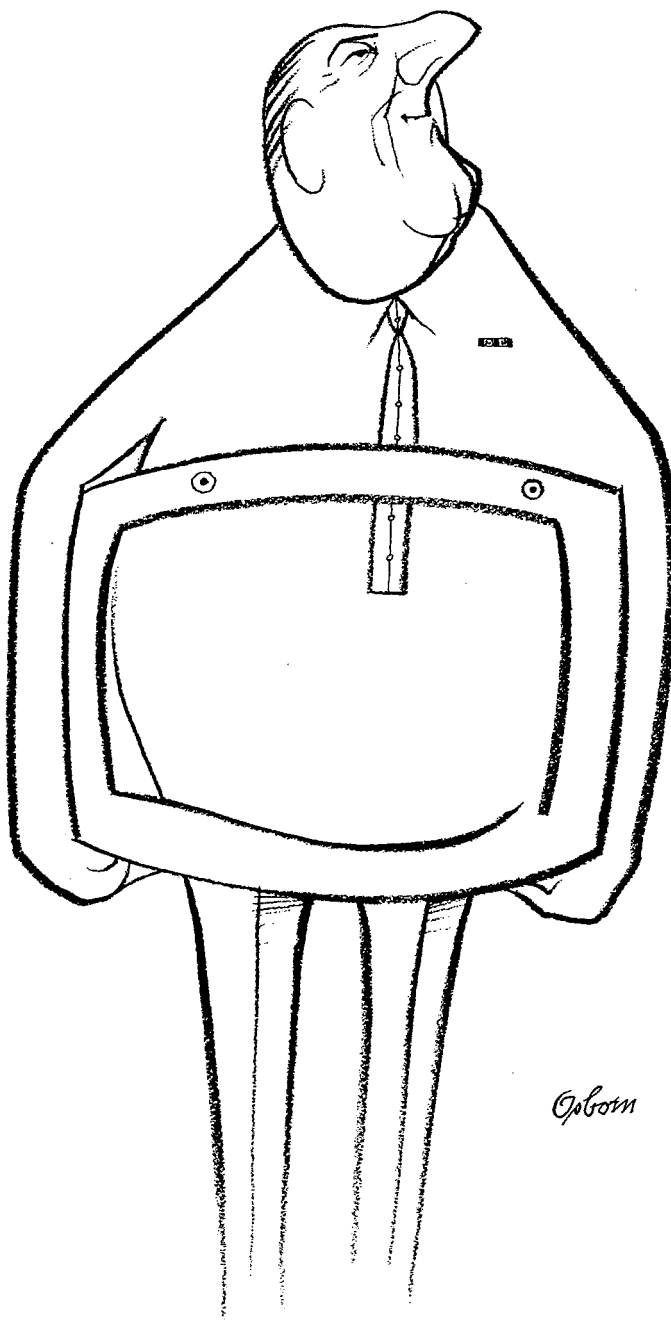
*I wanna talk to
you fellas!*

NOVEMBER 13, 1965



promptly put an end to the long harangues, and the sniping from the press quickly faded away.

Johnson became the most frequent performer on the Huntley-Brinkley and Cronkite news programs, to say nothing of others. His news conferences were half given over to evangelistic pronouncements and the celebration of appointments. He got himself on the air signing bills, greeting delegations, making speeches, walking his dogs. No other President has approached his exposure — certainly not after he pulled up his shirt to bare his surgical incision for the frankest photograph of the year.



What Johnson did, the public saw; what he said, the public heard; and this raises questions of real importance in a democracy. It is not so much a matter of propaganda, which can be seen through. Television's scholars tell us, anyway, that political appearances rarely change anyone's opinion.

They *do* create and strengthen opinion, and television now makes a tremendous impact on the public's basic knowledge of what is happening. To a large extent, these days, that knowledge is being shaped and guided by Lyndon Johnson, who has the position and the guile and the means to make more impact on it than anyone else. When he appeared beneath the Statue of Liberty, past which the forebears of millions of Americans had sailed with soaring hope, he may not have changed the opinion of a single opponent of the immigration reform bill, but he left no one who favored it or who had been an immigrant himself or whose parents had been immigrants in any doubt as to whose bill it was. That is impact.

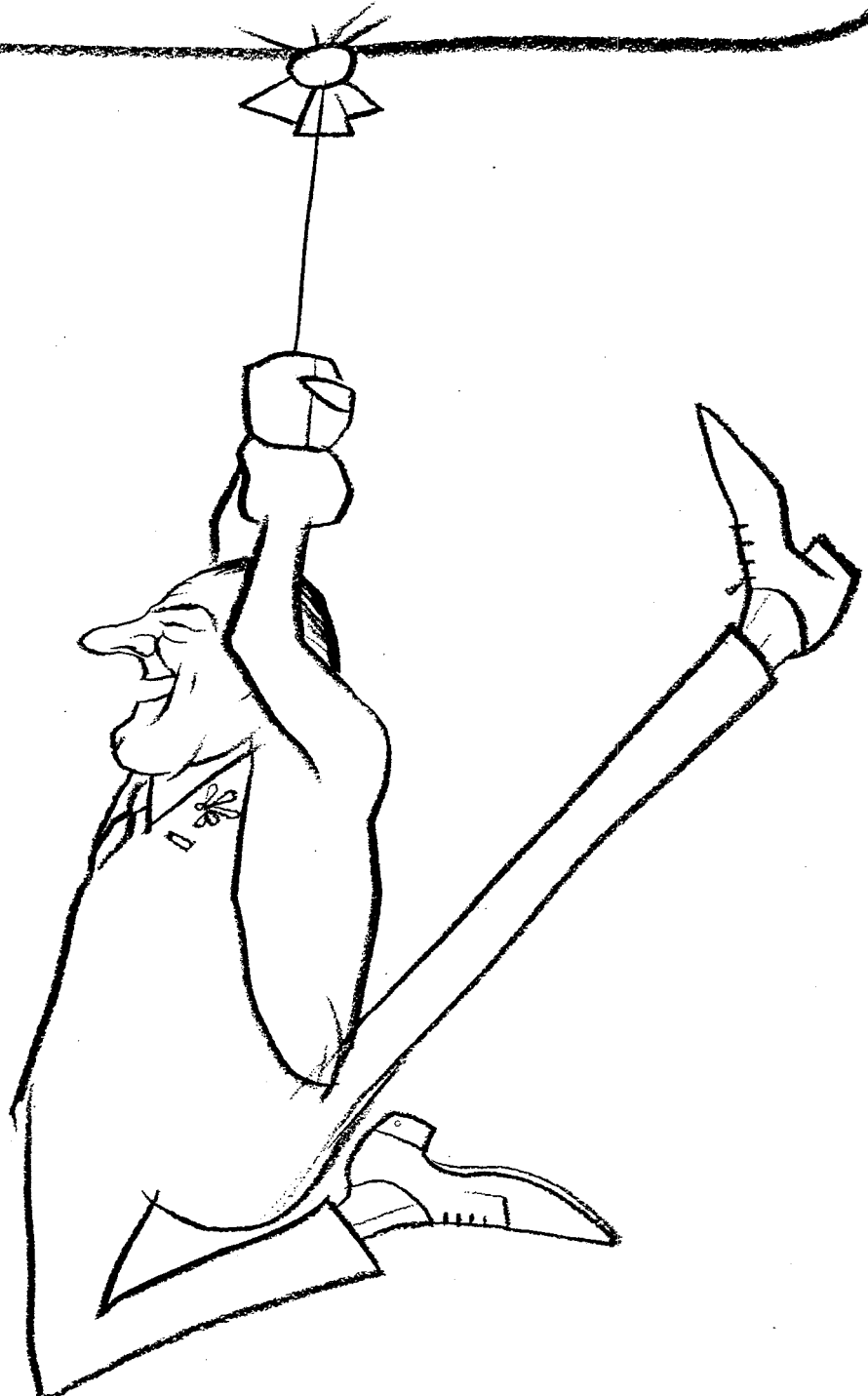
The President's influence on the public climate was intimately bound to the third major reason for his successful first year. That was the sheer extent of his accomplishments, the extraordinary variety of bases which, in a plural society, he touched so solidly.

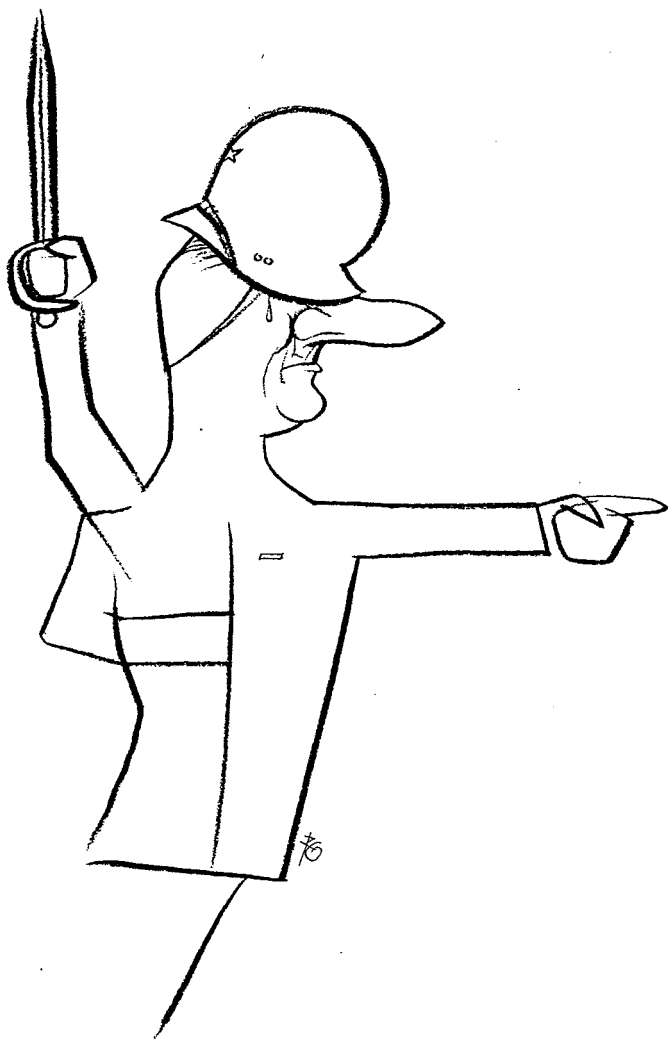
Johnson has understood as few Presidents have that in a variegated and intensely political society of conflicting interests, ideas and traditions no President can move far without broad public support. Perhaps no President has more successfully intertwined his substantive program, his political courtships, and his fulminations from the "bully pulpit" of the White House into a constant and unceasing quest for that public support which alone yields the ultimate power to act. Seldom, in its turn, has the power to act been exercised with such a careful eye to the quest for support.

Tax reduction, the voluntary program to right the imbalance of payments, the soft-voiced enforcement of price and wage guidelines, the frequent announcements of new government economies — all may be seen as Presidential achievements, but equally considered as appeals for the support of powerful economic interests. Add to the list the somewhat muted effort to repeal Section 14(b), the permissive attitude toward labor's desire to increase the minimum wage, a variety of civil rights and welfare programs, and the persistent public wooing of both sides, and it is possible to see how a liberal Democratic President has been able to marry business without divorcing labor.

If Congress virtually was ordered to pass the White House education bill, it still was given its head to produce its own medical care bill; and if its nose was kept to the grindstone, and its hand out of the President's prerogatives with a couple of vigorous vetoes, its leaders still were awarded their frequent hour in the television sun, and its members a heaping share of the

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President's praise and preferment.

Johnson went farther than any President ever had on behalf of the Negro in his voting rights speech and in his powerful address to the Howard University graduating class; but he crept along not much ahead of the white folks' pace in sending federal registrars into the South. He offended the righteous by granting Ted Kennedy's wish that the unlikely Francis X. Morrissey should have a place on the federal bench; but that was one slip to be measured against a host of excellent appointments – Justice Arthur Goldberg to the UN, for instance, and the impressive John Gardner to be Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare.

Medicare for the old folks and the young they might otherwise burden – civil rights for the Negroes and liberals – a new Cabinet department and a variety of other programs for the cities – continued federal support for the farmer – immigration reform for second-generation Americans – war on poverty for the disadvantaged – tax reduction for the businessman – the arts bill for the longhairs – the beautification program for women and gardeners – education for all, including Roman Catho-

lics and unemployed miners: considered solely on the balance sheet of political advantage, the Second Empire has offered and provided something for every interest, every group, save the Ku Klux Klan.

Where, as a result, is the strongest opposition to this tireless President? It is in none of the places where it might have been expected – not in the paralyzed Republican Party, not in a Congress dominated by local interest and states' rights, not in a business community dazzled by prosperity, not in the cantankerous liberal wing of the Democratic Party, not even among the Negroes with their suspicion of white moderation and their growing rejection of political action. It is rather among the obnoxious Klansmen and their ilk, on the one hand, and a handful of students and academics and pacifists on the other – groups linked by nothing but their positions on the opposite, outer edges of the political spectrum.

That is why Lyndon Johnson – despite all those who do not much care for him or for his manners – has such phenomenal support in the country today. To win is to gather power, and to expend power is to win support – that is the political cycle that Lyndon has mastered as nearly as his economists have conquered the business cycle.

The ultimate effect, of course, will be long in the weighing. It is in the nature of political action that leaders like Johnson achieve laws and set policies, then go on to others; the questions at which laws and policies are aimed remain. Medicare must be administered, the war on poverty must be won, not merely launched, the Negroes must actually be put on the voting rolls and into decent jobs, the junkyards must be physically removed, the parks and playgrounds carved out of the choking cities. Laws may be passed but rivers can remain eternally polluted. Vietnam and the Dominican Republic have at most been coped with for the moment, and – as if as a reminder – there is always the alliance, working its way again to the top of the agenda.

The politician may triumph, as Lyndon Johnson did in 1965 and may in 1966, but the triumph is only political. It is not conclusive.

